



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

HARRIET BEECHER STOWE.¹

THIS is a most interesting biography of an earnest, affectionate, high-minded Christian woman. Sufficient time has elapsed since the author of "Uncle Tom's Cabin" wrote her thrilling and dramatic tale of slavery in the South to allow the record of her life to be read dispassionately, and, we hope, reviewed in a spirit of fairness and with full appreciation of her genius and merit. When one has read the book through, perhaps the two impressions which stand out most clearly in the reviewer's mind are, first, the perfect sincerity of Mrs. Stowe, and along with this the feeling, which has by this time become a conviction, that she was, of all others, the one person pointed out by heredity and environment to be the author of "Uncle Tom's Cabin." Being what she was and living where she did, on the borders of a slave State, witnessing scenes and incidents that deeply touched her naturally sensitive and emotional temperament, the book was inevitable, or, as she herself said, "It made itself."

All this the editor, Mrs. Fields, has brought out with admirable skill and with a cumulative power that does her great credit. All that one wants to know, and that the reading public may be said to have a right to know, is here unfolded with the minimum of comment and explanation. The picture that she has drawn for us, or rather has allowed Mrs. Stowe to give of herself, is very realistic, and enlists our sympathies from the beginning.

As a child Harriet Beecher early gave evidence of that awakening intelligence that was to make her famous among the famous women of her day. Imagine a child of ten writing a composition on such a subject as this: "Can the Immortality of the Soul Be Proved by the Light of Nature?" But if the theme chosen seems to be extraordinary in one so young, what shall be said of the treatment. One scarcely

¹ "Life and Letters of Harriet Beecher Stowe." Edited by Annie Fields. Houghton, Mifflin & Co., Boston and New York.

knows whether to be more amused than astonished at the concluding paragraph of this remarkable essay: "Never, till the blessed light of the gospel dawned on the borders of the pit and the herald of the cross proclaimed 'Peace on earth and good will to men,' was it that bewildered and misled man was enabled to trace his celestial origin and destiny." Along with this literary curiosity a drama called "Cleon," written when she was a schoolgirl, deserves to be classed. This was a poem in blank verse, and, if one may judge from the printed extracts, gave promise of considerable literary power. There are passages that make one regret that Mrs. Stowe did not devote more of her time to the writing of poetry.

We feel, in reading of these early years of awakening intelligence, that we are really being made acquainted with conditions that are necessary to a proper understanding of Mrs. Stowe's character as she emerges from her obscurity into the sudden glare of literary fame. In order to form a correct judgment of the impassioned, high-minded woman of 1854, it is first necessary to know the young, sensitive, and impressionable girl of 1825. For this reason that portion of her biography deserves to be carefully read and studied. And in this connection no experience of her life throws more light upon her character than her religious conversion, which is so graphically told in her own words on page 50:

It was about this time that I first believed myself to be a Christian. I shall ever remember that dewy fresh summer morning. I knew that it was a sacramental Sunday, and thought with sadness that when all the good people should take the sacrificial bread and wine I should be left out. I came into church quite dissatisfied with myself, and as I looked upon the pure white cloth, the snowy bread, and shining cups of the communion table I thought with a sigh: "There won't be anything for me to-day; it is all for these grown-up Christians." Nevertheless, when father began to speak I was drawn to listen by a certain pathetic earnestness in his voice. Forgetting all his hair-splitting distinctions and dialectic subtleties, he spoke in direct, simple, tender language of the great love of Christ and his care for the soul.

Continuing, she thus describes the effect of the sermon upon her:

I sat intent and absorbed. "Oh, how much I need just such a friend!" I thought to myself. Then the awful fact came over me that I had never had any conviction of my sins, and consequently could not come to him. I longed to cry out, "I will," when my father made his passionate appeal, "Come, then, and trust your soul to this faithful Friend." Like a flash it came over me that if I needed conviction of sin he was able to give me even this also. I would trust him for the whole. My whole soul was illumined with joy, and as I left the church to walk home it seemed to me as if nature herself were hushing her breath to hear the music of heaven.

We are not surprised, after reading this account, to learn that Mrs. Stowe claimed to have visions. If she had lived in the fifteenth century, she might have been a second Maid of Orleans, whose mission it was to rekindle the national ardor and who claimed to receive revelations from heaven. Like Mrs. Browning, she was a firm believer in spiritualism, and the two are strangely alike. We note the same intense spiritual fervor, the same deep sympathy with the oppressed, the same willingness to espouse the cause of suffering humanity. She who wrote the "Cry of the Children" and the "Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" might, under similar conditions, have written "Uncle Tom's Cabin."

Mrs. Stowe's religious experience, as her son tells us, might have gone on developing as sweetly and naturally as the opening of a flower, if her sensitive soul had not been turned into bitterness by the morbid self-examination of the day. We never remember to have read a more terrible arraignment of the religious teaching of sixty years ago than the painful and affecting scene which is described on page 52. When young Harriet Beecher presented herself before the pastor of the First Church of Hartford, and asked to be allowed to connect herself with his church, this is the way in which he greeted her: "Harriet, do you feel that if the universe should be destroyed [awful pause] you could be happy with God alone?" After struggling in vain to fix in her mind some definite conception of the meaning of these terrible words, the timid and shrinking girl stammered out: "Yes, sir." "You realize, I trust," continued the Doctor, "in some measure at least, the deceitfulness of your heart, and that in punishment for your sins God might justly leave you to make yourself as miserable as you have

made yourself sinful." "Yes, sir," again stammered Harriet. With these awful words weighing upon her soul, no wonder that the joyous ecstasy of that beautiful sacramental Sunday was quenched in the horrible dread that "God might leave her to make herself as miserable as she had made herself sinful." How she emerged from this state of spiritual despair and morbid self-introspection is one of the best-told and most painful portions of this book. This deep experience in the life of Mrs. Stowe needs to be supplemented by another which occurred about the same time and which serves to show her ardent and affectionate nature. How charmingly naive is the picture that she gives of herself, when upon hearing of the death of Byron, the literary idol of his day, she went out into the fields and, flinging herself down upon a mound of hay, burst into a flood of tears and prayed with all the fervor of her young heart for the poet's forgiveness and salvation. It would be a mistake, however, to infer from what has been said that Mrs. Stowe was lacking in humor. The intense and serious side of her nature was relieved by a vivacity, cheerfulness, and keen sense of the ridiculous that made her the light of her home and the mainstay of her husband and children. For playful fancy and racy good humor nothing could exceed the very amusing description that the young Harriet gives of her father's journey to Cincinnati, where he had been called to be the head of the Lane Theological Seminary. Her letters are full of a sort of drollery that is often very amusing and sometimes quite clever. When writing to her friend Georgiana, after her marriage, she speaks of her children as "money on interest whose value will be constantly increasing." In the same playful vein she counsels her husband against "cultivation of indigo," meaning that he must not give way to a "case of the blues," to which he was by temperament addicted. Mrs. Stowe, as her biographer shows, was a great lover of nature, and her description of Niagara Falls is one of the most vivid and moving word pictures to be found anywhere. "Oh! that beautiful water rising like moonlight, falling as the soul sinks when it dies,

to rise refined, spiritualized, and pure; that rainbow, breaking out, trembling, fading and again coming like a beautiful spirit walking the waters. Oh! it is lovelier than it is great! It is like the Mind that made it: great, but so veiled in beauty that we gaze without terror." This visit to Niagara is closely associated with her marriage. It was during her absence in the East that she heard of the death of her dear friend, Eliza Tyler, the young wife of Professor Stowe. When she returned to Cincinnati she set herself the task of trying to console the sad and solitary man, and ended by falling in love with him herself. It was another instance of pity and sympathy resulting in a more ardent attachment. So far as we can judge, there was nothing at all romantic in her marriage, nor was Professor Stowe the kind of a man to call out the love of an ardent and highly impressionable young woman. He seems to have been a thoroughly good man, who was something of a pedant; genuinely attached to his wife and proud of her genius and fame, but not always as considerate as he might have been. One dislikes to judge when all the circumstances are not known, but it is difficult to understand how he could have left his wife for fifteen months for his health, and not have returned to his family when cholera was raging in Cincinnati and one of his children died of it.

No review of Mrs. Stowe's life would be complete without some reference to "*Uncle Tom's Cabin*," and this seems about as fitting a place as any to speak of it. One fact comes out clearly in this biography which helps us to understand how such a book came to be written, while it throws a flood of light upon its one-sided character and its failure to give a true picture of slavery and of life in the South before the war. When it is remembered that the materials for "*Uncle Tom's Cabin*" were gathered for the most part during her stay at Cincinnati, where she lived for seventeen years in close proximity to a slave State, and where she was made acquainted with many painful incidents and harrowing tales of inhuman treatment by fugitive slaves who escaped across the Ohio, it is easy to see that Mrs. Stowe was placed where she would receive the worst

possible impressions of slavery and where her judgment of the Southern slave-holder would necessarily be prejudiced. A border State was not exactly the place to judge of slavery as an institution; and fugitive slaves, just that class who would most likely give exaggerated and grossly distorted accounts of their treatment. We are therefore obliged to dissent from Mr. J. F. Rhodes, who is quoted as saying that Mrs. Stowe has given us the ultimate view of posterity on the subject of slavery. The author's intention was to give us a true picture of what she saw, and this she has done with wonderful vividness and power; but she saw only a part. The only visit she ever made to the South previous to writing "Uncle Tom's Cabin" was in 1834, when, in company with her friend, Miss Dutton, she found herself on the estate which was later known as Colonel Shelby's.

In the characters of "Uncle Tom" and "Colonel Shelby" she has done full justice to the better side of slavery in the South, but a wider acquaintance with Southern conditions would have shown her that "Uncle Tom" was not such a rare exception, and that "Colonel Shelby" was fairly representative of his class. It is easy to see how from a child Mrs. Stowe had had instilled into her a deep and ineradicable horror of slavery. As early as 1820, when the Missouri question was being agitated, she was profoundly impressed by the sermons and addresses of her father, who was himself a strong antislavery man. She remembers that every morning and evening a petition was offered up for "poor, oppressed, bleeding Africa," that the time of her deliverance might come. All her brothers were leading antislavery men, and none more so than her brother, Henry Ward Beecher, to whom she was devotedly attached. In her home at Cincinnati she and her husband frequently harbored fugitive slaves, and even received colored children into their school. She saw her brother depart with pistols to assist in quelling a mob that had destroyed an antislavery press and threatened to do other damage. Imagine any one with Mrs. Stowe's keenly sympathetic and excitable nature passing through such scenes, and immediate-

ly the conclusion is reached that, being the woman she was, she must have found some outlet for the pent-up passion of her soul, and this she did in "Uncle Tom's Cabin." It was therefore not the literary art of the book that made it sell. George Sand, Lowell, and a host of contemporary critics, were unanimous in condemning it from an artistic point of view. But the genius of the author, her dramatic power, and the intensity of feeling that she put into it, were like a contagion that swept everything before it. Lowell said of it that it was easy to account for its unexampled popularity by attributing it to a cheap sympathy with sentimental philanthropy. "We felt then, and we believe now, that the secret of Mrs. Stowe's power lay in that same genius by which great success in creative literature has always been achieved—the genius that instinctively goes right to the organic elements of human nature, whether under a white skin or black." Mrs. Stowe herself always spoke of the book as having made itself. The characters and scenes formed themselves in her mind, and when she transmitted them to paper she felt that she was only writing what she had seen. This gave to her book the character of a message from God, and it is impossible to read her life without feeling that she thought herself a divinely chosen instrument to labor in the cause of oppressed humanity. Her severest critics must do her justice here. The purity of her motive is beyond question. It is equally clear that she published "Uncle Tom's Cabin" with no intention of using it as a political engine to precipitate an internecine war. No one was more surprised at its popularity than herself. At the time of its publication she hoped that the antislavery movement would become a purely religious one. This is made clear by a letter to Fred Douglass, written just as her book was finished: "The light will spread in the Churches, and the tone of feeling will rise; Christians, North and South, will give up all connection with and take up their testimony against slavery, and thus the work will be done."

With every disposition to be fair, we are bound to say

that purity of motive and a highly emotional temperament, joined to deep spiritual fervor, are not necessarily qualities that would fit one to form a correct judgment or to write a true history. One must be under a strange delusion who, in the interest of truth, consults such sources of information as the antislavery library at Boston, and bases her judgment of slavery as an institution upon the highly colored statements of fugitive slaves and the ravings of the abolitionist press. We hope enough has been said to show that Mrs. Stowe was a woman who was ruled much more by her affections than by her reason. As it often happens with impulsive natures when their sympathies are keenly aroused, she was strangely credulous. At times this feeling swept her entirely away, and she is made to appear hysterical, and even sensational. During the throes of the civil war she seems to have lost her balance entirely, and writes to her friend, the Duchess of Argyle, with singular bitterness, of the brutality of Southern soldiers. "If I had written," she says, "what I know of the obscenity, brutality, and cruelty of that society down there, society would have cast out the books. I wish them no evil—feel no bitterness [strange contradiction!]. They have had a Dahomian education, which makes them savage. We don't expect any more from them." This is not the spirit of the noble-hearted Christian woman with which we were made acquainted at the beginning of this book, for plainly under the exciting and trying scenes of civil strife she has been transformed into an embittered partisan. And yet when one takes into consideration the circumstances under which this letter was written from what we know of Mrs. Stowe's character and disposition, it is not surprising that she should write bitterly and with a strong prejudice against the South. We say we are not surprised, and yet such immoderate language must furnish additional evidence that she was not the sort of person from whom to expect a fair and just account of slavery in the South. It is bad enough to accuse the society which produced a Lee and a Paul Hayne of having had a Dahomian education, but what shall be said of the charge that she makes against John C.

Calhoun, that he falsified a census report in order to prove that freedom was bad for the negroes? To charge the Secretary of State, a man of Calhoun's well-known integrity, with stooping to such a contemptible political trick is so insanely absurd as almost to be amusing. And yet this is what she writes to her married daughter after a somewhat lengthy perusal of John Quincy Adams' Diary published after the war: "Under his [Calhoun's] connivance even the United States census was falsified, to prove that freedom was bad for negroes." These words were written in 1882, when time and a somewhat extended stay at the South ought to have made her a fairer judge of Southern men and Southern conditions. But if Mrs. Stowe was not free from prejudice, she yet had the courage of her convictions. It is impossible not to admire her loyalty and willingness to brave public censure for the sake of a friend or for a cause which she believed just. A single instance will suffice to show that she never stopped to count the cost when her sympathies were enlisted and where she thought gross injustice had been done. After the publication of the "Guiccioli Memoirs" an article appeared in *Blackwood's Magazine* which reflected upon the character of Lady Byron in a way that cut Mrs. Stowe to the quick. Knowing Lady Byron as intimately as she did, it was wholly like herself to espouse her friend's cause. It is not wonderful that the public were deeply offended by what they considered a malicious attack upon their favorite poet. She might have shown on this occasion a deeper reverence for Byron's genius; but it seemed to her sense of right that great wrong had been done, and she willingly incurred the world's censure in order to vindicate her friend's character.

It is quite impossible to do full justice to this most interesting and instructive biography. There are many incidents that one would like to dwell upon, but for a fuller knowledge of Mrs. Stowe we must refer our readers to the book itself. We have spoken of Mrs. Stowe's singular cheerfulness and hopefulness under the most trying circumstances. The study of her life makes it abundantly evident that she had

her full share of sorrow and suffering, and her brave spirit and unfailing faith must often have been severely tried. She was physically never a strong woman. In the early years of her married life she struggled with ill health, poverty, and sickness. She lost a child with cholera; her son Henry, to whom she was devotedly attached, was drowned while a student at Dartmouth College; another son was so seriously wounded in the war that he died of the effects of the wound shortly after.

The painful and distressing trial of her brother, Henry Ward Beecher, with which the public have long since been familiar, was a terrible shock and grief to her sensitive, loving nature. But through every discouragement she was always brave and cheerful. In her later years she joined the Episcopal Church. This was not remarkable when we remember that her mother was a Church woman, and that her two married daughters were devotedly attached to the Episcopal Church. Although not a student of literature, Mrs. Stowe was an indefatigable writer. During her long and active life she wrote no less than thirty books, besides an incredible number of magazine articles and pamphlets. When the last page of the biography is read one lays the book down with a feeling that here is a faithful record of a singularly pure and unselfish life. Whatever may have been Mrs. Stowe's faults, her sterling virtues more than atoned for them. A woman of untiring industry, of simple faith in God, of remarkable power as a writer; a devoted mother, an affectionate and unselfish wife, a loyal and warmly attached friend, she passed from us at the great age of eighty-five, truly a noble and venerable figure!

WILLIAM A. GUERRY.